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ABSTRACT

Three Rivers Community College (TRCC) in Missouri began its self-study process in January of 1995. Within the next two and a half years, when the comprehensive evaluation visit took place, the steering committee, the coordinator, and the vice president/dean of academic affairs produced a self-study that gained continued accreditation for TRCC and ensured that the college would remain a vital component of the community it serves. This paper documents the self-study process, from its inception, through its organization and refinement, to the completion of the self-study report. A preliminary outline for the TRCC self-study was developed before the first steering committee meeting, and this outline served as the means by which subcommittees were organized. This initial outline also provided a kind of "North Star" that guided the self-study. As the steering committee achieved more sophisticated levels of understanding of the process, and of various aspects of the workings of the institution, the document was refined, reflecting this awareness. Guidelines by the North Central Association on preparing a self-study document proved invaluable to the TRCC project, particularly the Patterns of Evidence, and TRCC developed its own "Quick Reference Forms" that preceded each chapter in the document. (EMH)

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When the Self-Study Document is Complete... A Logical Approach to the Team Resource Room Using the Quick Referencing Form

by

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When the Self-Study Document is Complete. . .
A Logical Approach to the Team Resource Room
Using the Quick Referencing Form

An Overview: Self-Study at TRCC

The self-study process at Three Rivers Community College began in January of 1995 with the naming of the self-study coordinator, and the comprehensive evaluation visit occurred in October of 1997. During those 33 months, the steering committee, the coordinator, and the vice-president/dean of academic affairs labored to produce a self-study which would serve the purpose of gaining continued accreditation for Three Rivers, additionally ensuring that the college would continue to grow stronger while remaining a vital component of the Southeast Missouri area it serves.

From its inception, the steering committee set the goal to involve the entire college population, making certain at each juncture that subcommittee meetings, campus-wide gatherings, and smaller, focused group meetings pertaining to the self-study process were scheduled at various times in a variety of locations on campus. Each of the twelve steering committee members served as chair or co-chair of nine subcommittees that were correlated to the General Institutional Requirements and the Five Criteria. Faculty and staff chose committee assignments, and certain administrative personnel were designated as resource persons because of their proximity to and familiarity with specific areas of the college.

Throughout the process of gathering information, identifying strengths and concerns, and correlating findings, each subcommittee chair kept careful records of sources and their locations and provided the information to the self-study coordinator. As the coordinator compiled and wrote each section and chapter of the first draft, all documents, including copies of information gathered in its original form, material drafted by subcommittee chairs, and working drafts of the self-study report, were kept in files and updated as appropriate.

As drafts were completed, subcommittee chairs circulated copies of individual chapters to members, and the steering committee met to consider and approve final drafts as they were submitted to the vice-president/dean of academic affairs beginning in the fall of 1996.

Organization was a key in helping to prevent duplication of effort, and to all intents and purposes, organization was the overriding factor in the ultimate success of Three Rivers Community College's self-study process.

However, in the midst of the tremendous relief of completing the actual self-study document can come the gut-wrenching realization that the project is in many ways only beginning. Being prepared and being organized are the steering committee's resource room "Alka-Seltzer," and a working outline underscores the fact that it is never too early in the self-study process to begin to think of the resource room.

Developing a Working Outline

As the best of writers know, organization must be considered, and the very nature of a self-study document with many people involved in the writing process makes this especially important. A preliminary outline for the Three Rivers self-study was developed before the first steering committee meeting, and this outline served as the means by which committees were organized. This initial outline served the college well and provided a "North Star" toward which each subcommittee and the coordinator steered.

However, as drafting began, it became obvious that the document was flowing slightly differently than anticipated, and the working outline underwent minor revisions. As the steering committee achieved more sophisticated levels of understanding of the self-study process and of various aspects of the workings of the institution, the document moved toward becoming a reflection of this understanding.

For example, TRCC's initial outline delegated to one subcommittee every aspect of the college's student services. Campus activities and organizations for students are a very important way in which the college meets students' needs, and the subcommittee began gathering information. However, the subcommittee working on governance and administration quickly realized that it was duplicating efforts. The coordinator revised the outline to reflect student participation in governance without needless repetition of information in another chapter. Subcommittees shared information, duplication of effort was for the most part avoided, and the self-study document benefited.

In this manner, then, an organized steering committee can use the outline much to the advantage of the self-study document, of the institution, and especially of the people involved. What easily could have become a disorganized situation instead provided for better understanding. And months later, this increased understanding would become crucial as the resource room was synthesized.

We Are Good, But We Cannot Read Minds

For the newcomer to the self-study process, it is relatively easy to have an oversimplified perception of the task at hand: all that the steering committee must do is to gather information about the college, to organize it according to guidelines which respond to certain standards, then to give everything to the coordinator who will make stylistic decisions and put everything in one voice. It really does sound easy. However, from the perspective of an institution which has *successfully* completed the self-study process, the view is different.

The best attempts at organizing the self-study, while extremely beneficial, rarely provide ready solutions to every situation that can arise. From the viewpoint of the coordinator, though, most of the process will be less appalling if the careful keeping of documentation described earlier is observed faithfully.

It is imperative that each steering committee member share a common, institutional vision, and each subcommittee member must understand to what he or she is contributing. In the realm of the self-study, without a clear picture of the whole, the parts will not function. Initially, the coordinator must catch this vision and present it to the steering committee. Still, it can be shocking to "hear" the variety of voices and styles in which material is presented.

Early on, it is absolutely necessary for the coordinator to keep track of what comes from whom and where that information can be found . The nature of the self-study document does not allow for the inclusion of every piece of information, and many of those pieces of the self-study puzzle that will not be in the final draft provide important documentation and present patterns which must be identified and given consideration.

For example, an institution's budget is without doubt important documentation and certainly presents patterns which are significant. However, there is no place in a self-study document for an entire budget. Instead, crucial information that provides evidence of certain fiscal patterns must be included. A consultant-evaluator with a budgetary question easily can be directed to a well-organized resource room, and any information that he or she might need will result in a more focused and better informed inquiry to the office of the dean of financial affairs.

The entire process, then, is simply one of keeping track of information and preparing to provide a map of sorts to the visiting team. As the self-study progresses and files began to take shape, it is an excellent idea to keep a simple list in each file that correlates information and sources. These lists provide an informational safety net to steering committee members and the coordinator, and the impossible and confusing task of attempting to read minds does not enter the process.

Patterns of Evidence

Guidelines provided by the North Central Association for preparing a self-study document are invaluable, and of particular value are the Patterns of Evidence. These models can serve as the ultimate self-study road map through the twisting and sometimes treacherous months of preparation. As each subcommittee tackles its particular area, keeping the appropriate patterns of evidence in mind can cast light into even the more obscure points of understanding.

These "indicators," as the Commission labels them in the *Handbook of Accreditation, 1994 -96,* become indicative of a well-organized self-study, and further, they can provide steering committee members and the self-study coordinator with the perfect organizational tool.

As the working outline develops and as information reaches the steering committee, the coordinator will find tremendous benefit in a locally-adapted list of patterns of evidence for each section and chapter of the self-study document. While it is less difficult for an institution, regardless of size, to ascertain patterns of evidence for having "clear and publicly stated purposes consistent with its mission" (Criterion One), the waters can be less clear when establishing patterns which indicate that "the institution is accomplishing its educational and other purposes" (Criterion Three).

Using the Commission's *Handbook of Accreditation* as a guide, each steering committee member can establish a working list of the institution's patterns of evidence and use it throughout the process. As the coordinator checks and double-checks information, these local patterns become an invaluable tool in the organization of the self-study document.

However, patterns of evidence should not be taken for "a complete formula or recipe for conducting a self-study process," according to the *Handbook*. The self-study document "should summarize broadly the resources and variety of evidence examined, the means and criteria used to evaluate it, and the conclusions drawn from it." It is a summary document and "need not present all the evidence the institution has collected." Local patterns for evidence, then, combine with a working outline and a complete list of information and sources to contribute to a positive self-study process and, ultimately, to an organized resource room.

TRCC's Quick Referencing Form

What, exactly, does the steering committee do with 33 months' worth of collected evidence? After the self-study document and appendices are in the mail, there is the daunting task of organizing the resource room without relocating every piece of paper and every computer disk on campus. It is at this point that the organizational methods described become invaluable, and a simple Quick Referencing Form aids in the accessibility of information.

After the final draft is approved, each steering committee member and the coordinator must read through the document, checking to make certain that every item mentioned and every item referenced is on a master list for the chapter where it is found. Committee members check chapter by chapter, noting sources that have multiple references within the document. Files will be established for each resource, and those resources that cannot be placed easily within a file cabinet are noted.

Lists of labels necessary for file folders for each chapter's resources are compiled and numbered accordingly: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, and so on. When this process is complete, referencing sheets, or Quick Referencing Forms based on where information is located, are established.

For instance, an introductory chapter might contain demographic information in an assessment of the college environment. In an overview of enrollment trends for the 10-year period since the last self-study, a table charting full-time enrollment equivalents appears. Information contained in this table was gathered from copies of the registrar's reports. These reports are referenced not only in the introductory chapter but at several different locations in the self-study document. To avoid duplicating the reports at various locations in the files, they are included in the file cabinet under the chapter where they are first mentioned. The folder label for this item, then, would look something like this:

1.3 Registrar's Reports to the President, 1987 - 1997

The registrar's reports are placed in that folder. The chapter in which they are next referenced, Chapter Six, would contain a file with the following label:

6.5 Registrar's Reports to the President, 1987 - 1997

Inside this folder would be a sheet of paper that reads as follows:

The Registrar's Reports to the President are located in folder 1.3.

When material referenced is from a resource such as a large book that cannot be placed in a file cabinet, the file label and the sheet in the file folder might read like this:

12.2 TRCC 2000

Copies of *TRCC 2000: The Next Decade* are located on the shelves in the NCA Resource Room.

A Quick Referencing Form is prepared for each chapter, and each form lists reference material used in that chapter and where it can be located. Information that can be brought to the resource room is readily accessible, and information that cannot be placed

in the resource room can be located easily. Duplication is avoided, and visiting team members armed with Quick Referencing Forms for each chapter can find their way with comparative ease.

Each chapter in the self-study document has its own section in a file cabinet, and the first file folder in each chapter section contains a copy of its Quick Referencing Form. The visiting team is given copies of the Quick Referencing Forms for each chapter upon arrival, so in a manner of speaking, they have access to the resource room prior to their actual arrival on campus.

Conclusion

Organization is the key to a successful self-study process: a good working outline prevents duplication of efforts and provides structural guidance; keeping chapter-by-chapter lists of information and where it can be found ensures that chaos will not reign; and establishing local patterns of evidence helps to keep the entire process on-track. However, the best organization is no better than those who participate in its structure, and Three Rivers Community College possesses a veritable wealth of human resources.

During the self-study process, everyone on campus participated to some extent. Faculty and staff spent hours of valuable time in addition to their normal duties researching, compiling, writing, and meeting. Extensive campus involvement placed tremendous burdens on many, and without this dedication, the self-study could not have been completed. No one person is more or less responsible; rather, the successful whole is merely a synthesis of many dedicated parts.